

# Lessons From the Practice

## First Day of Class

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The 3 second-year medical students lingered just outside the hospital room, looking vaguely apprehensive and a little excited. It was the first day of their "Introduction to Clinical Medicine" course. The dispassionate world of the lecture hall and laboratory had been replaced by the mystery and real-life urgency of the hospital. Earlier that day each of the students had performed a history and physical examination on a patient. All three of the cases had been presented to me, and it was time to meet the first patient.

I led the way into the room, strode up to the second bed, and casually flipped through the vital signs clipboard. "I'm Doctor Hoch, Mrs Harris," I announced cheerily. I noticed the students hesitating just inside the door as they eyed me uneasily. "These students are learning about patients and sickness and the physical examination. You've met one of them, right?" With a wave of my hand I motioned them inside and hooked a finger at Cheryl, the student who had reported on Mrs Harris.

"Yes," Mrs Harris nodded from her bed. She wore an accommodating smile. Her face was heavily seamed and aged beyond her 40 years. She had a dreadful case of rheumatoid arthritis and the day before had been admitted with severe anemia and a gastrointestinal hemorrhage. Clear intravenous tubing, transformed to the dull red color of beets, hung from a bag of packed red cells.

"Mrs Harris, what was it like when you first developed your illness?" I asked.

"Well, Doctor, I've never been asked that question exactly." She paused a moment. "What I remember mostly was how I just thought my toes were sore from too much aerobics."

Mrs Harris then recounted how her life had been changed by the natural course of her disease. She consulted more than one physician because of her feet and shoulder pains, but the diagnosis was missed for months. Accustomed to regular exercise and a life of physical fitness, she struggled at first to maintain her routine. "I just wanted the doctors to help me continue my exercising and to have a normal life with my kids." Ultimately she faced the realities of gold injections, tendon implants, and a new routine: life with a chronic illness.

"Of course, I can't do aerobics anymore, but I have

been able to take care of my kids still." She fell silent and her eyes spoke volumes. She brushed back tangled brown hair from her face and, in the easy manner of experienced patients, displayed her body for the physicians. We examined her twisted skeleton and the joint deformities; the students looked with gaping, almost fearful interest, as if Mrs Harris's limbs were about to snap.

As we left the room, Mrs Harris called out, "Thank you, doctors, thanks a lot." We waved to her on the way out and moved on to the other two patients.

Later we gathered at the nurses' station. The students spoke excitedly of their patients and the physical findings: a gallop rhythm of heart failure, ascites, and hepatomegaly. This was pathophysiology come alive after two years of inanimate preclinical studies.

"What was the most amazing thing you learned today?" I asked.

"I heard a third heart sound!" Cheryl beamed.

"That is important, sure. But why do you think Mrs Harris thanked us? After all, we only took her history and some of her time, yet she gave us so much more." They exchanged puzzled looks.

"We validated her life and her suffering, we gave it meaning," I said. She had been accustomed to physicians scrutinizing her disease from the artificial shelter of medical science, where the rheumatoid arthritis was of most interest. "Instead, we were interested in what is for her far more important than science and diagnosis, the subjective world of her suffering. Ironically, by so doing we helped her survive another day."

I looked carefully at the faces of the students. They seemed vaguely interested. They had heard this sort of thing before and knew what I said was relevant, but it certainly was not information required to pass the course.

"If you listen closely, patients will not only tell you how they endure but teach lessons that may help you endure. Now that is a splendid gift, isn't it? And it happens every day of your career."

I left them at the nurses' station, with the hope that I had taught them something useful about taking a history and doing a physical examination. But I knew that whatever I had taught them was insignificant compared to what Mrs Harris had done for them.

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